

The doctrine of worship set forth in the Westminster Standards, just like every other doctrine there set forth, begins with God as its ultimate fountain, origin, and reason. God is infinitely worthy of all worship because of the perfection of his nature and his attributes. God is worshiped because of who he is. He is God. He is intrinsically and infinitely worthy of all service and honor. It follows then that God himself is the only object of worship. There is none worthy of worship but God alone, and all worship is due to him alone. According to the Standards, it is false worship or “idolatry” to give that honor to any other which is due to God alone, (Shorter Catechism A.47). Worship is something that belongs peculiarly to God as an expression of his nature reflected back to him by those he has created. It glorifies God by reflecting his glory and by making it known to all creation. By its very definition and end, worship must be restricted to those elements or inward and outward exercises which God himself has instituted, (SC A.50,51). Sinful creatures are not in and of themselves capable of devising the proper means to worship God. Any addition or invention which is beside or on top of that which God requires for worship must necessarily be detrimental and even deceitful as an expression of God’s nature. If worship is to glorify God by reflecting him for who he is, then any distortion or misconception of his nature added to worship by sinful creatures must dishonor God and mislead the worshipers concerning him. The Scriptures make this clear in repeated prohibitions of worshiping God by images, or in a deeper spiritual sense, by any human inventions whatsoever. Thus, that service which is due to God in worship consists of all those elements and only those elements which God has revealed to man for his worship. Any other practices outside of Scripture are forbidden by definition. The reasons given for God’s exclusive privilege to order human worship are his sovereignty over us, his propriety in us, and the zeal he has for his own worship, (SC A.52). This zeal must be understood in the context first of all in the supreme divine right God has as our Creator and Redeemer to require of us whatsoever he will, and secondly in the dreadful, soul-endangering misconception of God that follows whenever we seek to worship God through the devices of our own sin-stained imagination.

In discussing the topic of “worship”, it is important to note that there is a sense in which every good work done for the glory of God is a form of worship. Rising up out of bed in the morning, eating and drinking, working in the field or in an office can all be considered types of “worship” in this sense when they are done to the glory of God. Yet there is another meaning to the term “worship” which is too often overlooked in this age of “seeker-sensitive” and consumer-oriented religion. The people of God must take time regularly to do those things which are specifically commanded for no other purpose than to worship God. There are religious exercises which God has ordained for his people that are peculiar to his service such as the preaching of the word, prayer, praise, baptism, and the Lord’s supper. There is no common or worldly purpose for these exercises, and so they must be placed in a different category as belonging particularly to God himself and to God alone in contrast to all those other godly activities in which Christians involve themselves on a day to day basis. The Westminster Standards use the term “worship” in this narrow sense as referring to those particular, stated activities that God has ordained for his covenant people to honor him regularly, and also to the heart adoration from which all such true worship must flow. This paper is concerned with these activities and the very underlying concept of such *stated* or *formal* worship.

Worship at its origin has its source in the nature and character of almighty God. The Westminster Confession of Faith first mentions worship in chapter 1 on the Holy

Scripture. One could not expect to find a mention of worship in the chapter dealing on God's revelation to man (i.e. the Holy Scripture) if worship originated somewhere or in someone else outside of God. The fact that worship is treated as a part of revelation points to its divine origin. Chapter 1, section 6 of the Confession notes first of all that everything which is necessary for God's glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is revealed in some way or another in the Scriptures, with the explanation that there are some common circumstances concerning the worship of God and other godly activities which are to be governed by the light of nature and Christian prudence. Let us notice here what is said and what is not said. According to this chapter, all that is necessary to be known for God's glory and the Christian life is revealed in the Scripture. Certainly this includes all the elements of true worship. It is only the surrounding circumstances concerning worship, those things common to human life which are necessary to aid worship but are not actually part of worship itself, which do not require a positive warrant from the Scriptures. The Bible doesn't tell us what clothes to wear to worship or in what kind of building to worship, but certainly we must wear something and we must worship somewhere safe that is sheltered from the weather. In the language of the Westminster divines, such "circumstances" which were to be ordered by the light of nature include those things which are beside but not a part of worship. The next mention of worship in the Confession occurs in chapter 3 on God and the Holy Trinity, expressing the idea that God's sovereignty and propriety over all his creatures implies his absolute right to require whatsoever form of service or worship pleases him. The principal chapter of our Confession dealing with worship, chapter 21, starts off again with God in his nature and character as he is to be understood by the light of nature but then states that all true worship must be instituted by God himself. Here we note that the worship of God is to be understood first of all in terms of God and his revelation to us. Worship then, begins with God and extends to his people as those who worship in obedience to God's commands.

God has a covenant relationship with his worshipers as their God, and they are his chosen people. In this covenant relationship God as the Redeemer has every prerogative to require of his people whatever service and obedience is pleasing to him. The covenant people of God, the church, is obliged to observe and obey whatever he commands them based on their relationship to God and his to them. To this end all of the biblical instructions for worship, starting with the Mosaic ceremonial laws concerning the tabernacle and temple, required strict adherence. The Israelites were to worship God because of the covenant relationship that God established and maintained with them as their Savior and Redeemer. This principle of worship was expressed in terms of a covenant relationship and was contrasted with the practices of the gentiles who did not stand in a covenant relationship with the God of Israel. Thus when the Israelites were preparing to enter the land of Canaan the LORD said:

When the LORD thy God shall cut off the nations from before thee, whither thou goest to possess them, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their land; Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it. Deut 12:29-32

Here we see the antithesis that God makes between the world and his covenant people. The covenant forms the basis of Israel's required service to the LORD. God frames the explanation for this regulative principle of worship in terms of his hatred of all false worship, and the danger of worshiping God in ways other than what he has commanded. We can see from the example of this passage that those who would follow unauthorized worship practices put themselves and their posterity in grave danger. So there is an aspect in which God requires his people to adhere strictly to his commands for worship for their own good. Those who would deviate from the Scriptural instructions for worship by adding things put their own and their children's souls in danger because they misrepresent God. God was so concerned that his people would represent him correctly in worship that he gave them the very songs to sing in the God-breathed book of Psalms, which has served as the manual of praise for the people of God for over three thousand years, (2 Chron 29:30).

This regulative principle of worship is nowhere abrogated in the New Testament. God is no less the Redeemer of the New Covenant church than he was to the church of the Old Covenant. It is every bit as spiritually-dangerous for the Christian Church today to misrepresent God in her beliefs and practices as it was for the Jewish Church of old. Thus the Westminster divines framed a principle of worship based on Scripture alone. God gave the Jews rites and ceremonies which typified Christ as the Redeemer and High Priest of his people. In the New Testament gospels and epistles God gave his people a much clearer, purer, and simpler form of worship which emphasizes the fullness of understanding of God's plan of redemption that we have in Christ. Those ordinances which teach more clearly are emphasized, such as the preaching of the word, baptism, and the Lord's supper. The Westminster Divines listed the elements of New Testament worship in section 5 of chapter 21 of our Confession. They are few in number and more didactic than ceremonial. New Testament worship is "in Spirit and in truth" Jn 4:24. This phrase highlights the purity, simplicity, and spirituality of that form of worship which God ordained for his people in the New Testament Scriptures in contrast to the ceremonies of the Old Testament which taught Christ only in types and shadows. It's far from giving Christians a license to invent forms of worship liberally according to whatever strikes their fancy! We are still sinners and we still need God's instructions to understand him and to worship him correctly. The forms have changed with Christ's coming, but the principle remains the same.

Not only then are God's people required to observe all of his commands for worship, but any other practices are excluded. Our Confession states, "...the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scriptures." Chap. 21, sec. 1. The position of our Westminster Standards, and of all historic Reformed creeds and confessions, is that God is only to be worshiped in the way that he has prescribed in the Scriptures. All of the unacceptable sources for prescribing worship that our Confession mentions are lumped together as being detrimental and antithetical to true worship. Man since the fall is a sinner. Even reborn man is still tainted by sin in his mind and heart, (1 Jn 1:8). Therefore our Confession lumps the imaginations of all men together with the suggestions of Satan as a source for worship. The Confession of Faith, in chapter 16 on good works, notes that

“goods works” only include obedience to those things which God has commanded. Certainly worship qualifies as a good work in this sense. In the exposition of the second commandment given in the Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, we are reminded of Jesus’ teaching that not only obedience to the letter of the commandments is required, but also the heart intent of the law. The second commandment forbids not only graven images, but also “all [sins] of the same kind are forbidden...together with all the causes, means, occasions, and appearances thereof, and provocations thereunto.” (Larger Catechism A.99) Thus Christians are forbidden to make up ways to worship God according to their own imagination and devices just as we are forbidden to make images of God.

The Westminster Standards offer a pure and simple doctrine of worship. Worship begins with God’s nature and attributes and is given to his people by means of a covenant relationship. The nature of worship and the relationship between God and his people requires that the church observe all that and only that which God has ordained for his worship. This principle of worship remains the same throughout the Old and New Testaments, honors God as our Redeemer, and keeps worship *safe* for us and our children. God’s people are forbidden to devise ways to worship God of their own imaginations, and all that is required for the church to know and to practice God has revealed to us in his word.